



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

[New Search](#) | [About RIR's](#) | [Help](#)

23 February 2006

PHL101105.E

Philippines: Activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (2004 - 2006)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

General Information

The Abu Sayyaf ("bearer of the sword") Group (ASG) (Abuza Sept. 2005, 2; AFP 2 Feb. 2006) is a relatively small grouping of Islamic militants, with estimates of its size ranging from 200 to 500 members (Abuza Sept. 2005, 27; AFP 8 Apr. 2004; *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 6). Based largely in the southern Philippines since the early 1990s (ibid.), the ASG is said to have links with the regional Jihadi organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) (ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 1) and the international terrorist network Al-Qaeda (*Asia Times* Online 18 Jan. 2006; *Economist* 17 Feb. 2005), though Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported that financial support for the ASG from Osama Bin Laden ceased in the mid-1990s (AFP 8 Apr. 2004). The group is active in various locations in the south, including their traditional strongholds in the Sulu archipelago (particularly in Basilan, Jolo and Tawi Tawi), and more recently throughout the island of Mindanao (Abuza Sept. 2005, 27; ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 8; *Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004), the traditional base of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (ibid.; ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 8). According to Zachary Abuza, senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace and author of several books on terrorism in southeast Asia, command and control of the ASG is limited, while membership is fluid and characterized by "little discipline or internal unity" and "small compartmentalized cells for specific operations" (Abuza Sept. 2005, v, 27). Although little is known of the leadership structure, it is believed that the ASG is led by Khadaffy Janjalani, the younger brother of its founder (ibid., 28; *Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004), Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani (Abuza Sept. 2005, 2). Khadaffy Janjalani is supported at his base in Mindanao by a group of lieutenants, while additional commanders are based at locations in the Sulu archipelago (ibid., 28). The United States (US) Department of State has placed the Abu Sayyaf on its list of foreign terrorist organizations (US 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 6).

Training Activities and Links with Other Militant Groups

In a 2005 report on terrorism in the Philippines, the International Crisis Group (ICG) asserted that Indonesian and Malaysian fugitives from the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) had become more closely associated with the Abu Sayyaf after 2002 (19 Dec. 2005, 1). According to Philippine authorities, some Indonesian militants have provided training to Abu Sayyaf members in bomb-making (Dow Jones Newswires 2 Feb. 2006). The ASG has also forged ties with the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), a small grouping of militant Muslim converts whose objective is the "re-Islamisation" of the northern Philippines" (ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 1; see also AFP 2 Sept. 2005). The ICG remarked that "[t]he ASG-RSM-JI link is mutually beneficial in several ways. RSM and ASG get the direct benefit of JI expertise and technical assistance. JI and the ASG get new field operatives [from the ranks of the RSM]" (19 Dec. 2005, 1).

Following joint US-Philippine military attacks against the ASG in the Sulu archipelago, a core group of ASG members have moved onto the "traditional turf" of the MILF, the separatist group negotiating for peace with the Philippine government (*Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004), on Mindanao island (ibid.; ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 8, 11). This move, according to ICG, afforded Abu Sayyaf members use of "the most advanced training facilities" of the JI from September 2003 to October 2004 (ibid., 11). Some ASG recruits are believed to have also received infantry training, and possibly training in explosives, from a JI operative in 2003 (ibid., 11). An ASG member who was captured by the Philippine police in early 2005 told authorities that the group had received training in scuba diving in preparation for seaborne attacks in cooperation with the JI outside the Philippines (AP 17 Mar. 2005). The captured member also told authorities that the JI had contributed US\$18,500 to ASG coffers in the previous year for training in explosives (ibid.). Two militants associated with the ASG convicted in the 14 February 2005 bombing of a bus in Manila were reportedly trained by the JI (ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 17). In Zachary Abuza's estimation, the bomb-making capabilities of the ASG improved "dramatically" between 2004 and 2005 (Abuza Sept. 2005, 29).

Criminal Activities and Arrests

According to the US Department of State, the stated objective of the Abu Sayyaf is to promote an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago (*Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 6), the only parts of the Philippines where Muslims comprise a majority of the population (*Asia Times* Online 18 Jan. 2006). Yet, for several years the ASG undertook "deadly, though hardly political" kidnappings for ransom and profit (Abuza Sept. 2005, 1; see also *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 6;

Time Asia 23 Aug. 2004). The ASG's current leader, Khadaffy Janjalani, however, has stated publicly that he would steer the ASG back to its original goal of independence (*Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004). Beginning in 2003, the ASG abandoned its tactic of kidnappings for ransom and began to take part in a number of terrorist attacks (Abuza Sept. 2005, 10), marking a return to "its Islamic roots" and a renewed attempt to achieve independence in the south, using various means, including bombings and assassinations (*Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004).

Attacks in which the Abu Sayyaf has been implicated between 2003 and 2005 include:

the bombing, in concert with members of JI and MILF, of the airport in Davao and the Sasa Wharf, both in Mindanao, in March and April 2003, killing a total of 48 people and wounding 204 others (Abuza Sept. 2005, 10)

the bombing, in February 2004, of SuperFerry 14 in Manila Bay, killing more than 100 passengers (ibid., 1; *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 6; *Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004)

the bombing, in December 2004, of a market in General Santos City on the island of Mindanao, which caused 14 deaths and injured 70 (Abuza Sept. 2005, 11)

three almost simultaneous bombings on 14 February 2005 in Manila, in General Santos City and in Davao, killing more than 10 people and injuring several others (ibid.; AFP 21 Feb. 2005; *Asia Times* Online 18 Jan. 2006)

bombings in August 2005 in Zamboanga City and Basilan in the Sulu Archipelago, injuring 50 people (ibid.)

A spokesperson for the Abu Sayyaf stated that the 14 February 2005 attacks had been carried out in retaliation for alleged atrocities committed by the Philippine government against Muslims (AFP 14 Feb. 2005; *The Economist* 17 Feb. 2005). The spokesperson accused the Philippine military of killing whole families on the island of Jolo during battles against separatist rebels in the south, and vowed the ASG would not put a stop to its attacks until it obtained retribution for these past atrocities (AFP 21 Feb. 2005). According to sources, ASG operatives were aided in the 14 February 2005 attacks by the JI (*Asia Times* Online 18 Jan. 2006; see also ICG 19 Dec. 2005, 8) while Abuza notes that Muslim converts associated with the ASG were involved in every attack plotted by the group beginning in 2004 (Abuza Sept. 2005, 36).

A number of other terrorist attacks by the ASG were averted (Abuza Sept. 2005, 10-11; *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch. 5). For example, in June 2004, police arrested six ASG operatives in possession of explosives whom authorities suspect were plotting further attacks on SuperFerries in July 2004 (Abuza Sept. 2005, 10). In December 2004, three ASG members with plans to bomb the American embassy in Manila were also arrested (ibid., 11).

According to an 18 January 2006 *Asia Times* Online article, the ASG was responsible for "most of the violence" in the Philippines in 2005 and, in addition to the attacks outlined above, was involved in dozens of smaller battles with military and police units in the south. For example, in 2004, Abu Sayyaf militants reportedly opened fire on Philippine troops on the island of Tawi Tawi, who returned fire, ultimately resulting in the death of two ASG members (AFP 1 Aug. 2004). Over the course of four days in November 2005, ASG militants and Philippine soldiers exchanged fire on the island of Jolo, leaving four soldiers and up to twenty militants dead, and prompting roughly 2,000 villagers to flee their homes (ibid. 15 Nov. 2005).

Zachary Abuza wrote that, between October 2004 and February 2005, the Abu Sayyaf Group was behind a string of kidnappings that ended in executions rather than their characteristic demands for ransom (Sept. 2005, 11, 12). Abuza commented that "[t]he trend now seems to be to kill all suspected intelligence operatives or informers" (Sept. 2005, 11). In May 2004, however, the ASG released four hostages kidnapped seven months earlier at a Malaysian resort in Borneo, reportedly for a ransom of 200,000 ringgit (US\$52,000) (AFP 24 May 2004; DPA 25 May 2004).

Besides bombings and kidnappings, the ASG was reportedly setting up an urban assassination squad known as Fisabilillah or "The Path of God" (*Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004), led by Khadaffy Janjalani and other ASG and JI members (Abuza Sept. 2005, 11). Suspected ASG militants arrested in June 2004 were members of the squad, according to authorities (*Time Asia* 23 Aug. 2004). Authorities also alleged that the ASG had begun to deploy up to 80 operatives to the city of Manila to carry out bombings, though Abuza wrote in his report that there was "no known organizational presence" of the ASG in Manila as of September 2005 (Abuza Sept. 2005, 36).

A small group of inmates, including suspected Abu Sayyaf members, took part in an attempted jailbreak in March 2005 in Manila, overtaking a building at a maximum security prison where more than 100 Muslim rebels, most of them suspected ASG members, were being detained (AP 17 Mar. 2005; DPA 14 Mar. 2005). The 29-hour standoff ended in a police raid that killed 22 prisoners, including three "prominent" ASG commanders (AP 17 Mar. 2005).

According to the 18 January 2006 *Asia Times* Online article, the ASG is "carving for itself a role as a nexus for disgruntled members of revolutionary groups and ... terrorists." For his part, Abuza told *Time Asia* that the ASG

could evolve into the main radical Islamic group in the southern Philippines and a "magnet for dissatisfaction" for young Muslims, including those returning from study in the Middle East (23 Aug. 2005). But while Philippine authorities have recorded a number of successes in arresting and convicting some ASG members, problems endemic to the Philippine law enforcement and justice system, such as low pay and corruption, have made it difficult to prosecute suspected terrorists (*Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* 27 Apr. 2005, Ch.5). Despite the introduction of new counter-terrorism bills in Congress, no anti-terrorism legislation was passed in 2004, and terrorist acts had yet to be defined or codified (ibid.). Information on the current status of the counter-terrorism bills could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

- Abuza, Zachary. September 2005. "Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf." <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB625.pdf>> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2006]
- Agence France-Presse (AFP). 2 February 2006. "Six Killed in Attack on Christians in Southern Philippines." (Factiva)
- _____. 15 November 2005. "Four Days of Fighting Ends in Southern Philippines." (Factiva)
- _____. 2 September 2005. "Muslim Convert Group Biggest Security Concern in Philippine Capital." (Factiva)
- _____. 14 February 2005. Karl Wilson. "Onze morts, 93 blessés dans des attentats revendiqués par Abou Sayyaf." <<http://www.afp.com>> [Accessed 21 Feb. 2005]
- _____. 1 August 2004. "Two Abu Sayyaf Guerrillas Killed, One Wounded in Southern Philippines." (Dialog)
- _____. 24 May 2004. "Ransom Paid for Four Alleged Abu Sayyaf Hostages: Malaysian Police." (Dialog)
- _____. 8 April 2004. Cecil Morella. "Les islamistes d'Abu Sayyaf ouvrent un nouveau front à Manille." <<http://www.afp.com>> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2004]
- Asia Times Online. 18 January 2006. Fabio Scarpello. "Jihadi Threat Looms Over Philippine Peace Hopes." <<http://www.atimes.com/>> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2006]
- Associated Press (AP). 17 March 2005. Jim Gomez. "Philippine Military Report Says Abu Sayyaf Guerrillas Training for Seaborne Terror Attacks." (Dialog)
- Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*. 27 April 2005. United States Department of State. Washington, DC. <<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/45394.htm>> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2006]
- Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA). 14 March 2005. "Five Dead in Abu Sayyaf Prison Siege in Philippines." (Dialog)
- _____. 25 May 2004. "Philippines Vows to Crush Abductors of Indonesians, Filipino." (Dialog)
- Dow Jones Newswires. 2 February 2006. "Philippines: Abu Sayyaf Plotting Fresh Attacks in Manila." (Factiva)
- The Economist* [Manila]. 17 February 2005. "New Abu Sayyaf." <http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=3675637> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2006]
- International Crisis Group (ICG). 19 December 2005. *Philippine Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts*. <<http://www.crisisgroup/home/index.cfm?id=3844&1=1>> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2006]
- Time Asia*. 23 August 2004. Simon Elegant. "The Return of Abu Sayyaf." <<http://www.time.com/asia/magazine/prinout/0,13675,501040830-686107,00.html>> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2006]

Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.